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ABSTRACT

Using an educational theory labeled the new sociology of knowledge, this paper examines how an individual teacher acquires, evaluates, and utilizes the knowledge necessary to live and work as a physical education teacher in a high school and in a community. The study endeavored to locate the sources of the teacher's occupational knowledge, understand the processes used in evaluating that knowledge, and recognize the modes and functions of that knowledge in physical education classes. Data collection and analyses focused on the culture and subcultures informing and influencing the teacher's work. Particular attention was given to the cultures of community, school, and profession. Findings analyze five primary sources of knowledge appropriated by the teacher: (1) the community; (2) the school; (3) the teaching profession; (4) personal biography; and (5) occupational exerience. Results led to the conclusion that the teacher's personal biography and perceptions of the messages embedded in school and community cultures played primary roles in shaping and defining the teacher's pedagogical practice in physical education. It is noted that recognition of the cultural codes embedded in the intellectual activity of a teacher identifies the social mission performed by schools. (JD)

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From the outside in and back again: A sociological analysis of the acquisition, evaluation, and utilization of a teacher's occupational knowledge

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Running Head: Occupational Knowledge

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This is the story of an experienced educator fictitiously named Steve Sommers[1]. It is also a study that attempts to understand how Steve acquires, evaluates, and utilizes the knowledge necessary to live and work as a physical education teacher in the high school that is part of the community of Emerald Valley.

A radical educational theory labelled the new sociology of knowledge (Young, 1971) was used to guide and focus the course of this study. The rise of radical theories in the critique of educational practice has provided a language by which discourse on the pedagogical experiences of schooling can be linked to their wider social context. Schools no longer viewed as distinct and isolated institutions can be seen to hold a dialectic relationship with a larger social order. The interplay of society and school shapes both the daily experience and long-term agenda of public schooling.

As Wexler (1987) noted, the "new sociology of education aims to analyze social knowledge in schooling and social knowledge about schooling as relative, socially determined and ideological" (p. 36). Knowledge is seen as cultural capital; an object of value which forms the bases for the economy of the classroom. The search is undertaken to discover not only the physical sources of classroom knowledge, but also to make visible the embedded cultural messages and the ideological perspective used to screen, evaluate and utilize the available knowledge. This study endeavored to locate the sources of a teacher's occupational knowledge, understand the processes used in evaluating that knowledge, and recognize the modes and functions of that knowledge in physical education classes.

Methodology

In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of this study, data collection and analyses focused on the culture and subcultures informing and influencing Steve's work. Particular attention was given to the wider social context of Steve's work world (i.e. the cultures of community, school, and profession). In my observations and conversations, I attempted to understand both the kinds and purposes of occupational knowledge one teacher appropriated from his social experiences.

Setting

Emerald Valley is a small, rural town in Oregon. The town has a blend of two distinct social groups. One group is agriculturally oriented (e.g. wood products workers, nut growers, tree farmers) and the other is artistic-intellectual (e.g. writers, poets, university faculty). Education is held in high regard by the people of Emerald Valley. To support its desire for a first rate education system, Emerald Valley has one the highest tax bases in the state.

Emerald Valley High School enrolls approximately 470 students. There is a very small minority population and approximately 15-20% of the students are classified as low-income. Two years prior to this study, Emerald Valley High School received an award from the United States Department of Education for educational excellence. It was one of only 22 such awards made nationally that year.

E.V.H.S. has two physical education teachers; one for boys (Steve) and one for girls (Susan). The freshman physical education classes are segregated by gender and have similar curricula. The majority of the other p.e. classes are co-ed and are divided by student interest (e.g. recreational sports, weight training).

Teacher

Steve Sommers has taught physical education for 16 years; 14 of those years at E.V.H.S. In addition to his teaching duties, he coaches the girls' basketball team and performs normal student counseling activities. During summer vacation, he works at a local lumber mill. He does not, however, work outside the school during the academic year.

Steve was informed of all aspects of this study (including its purpose), was allowed access to all data sources, and was presented with a final copy of the completed study for his review and comment.

Data Collection

Data were collected and analyzed using a variety of ethnographic techniques (Wolcott, 1988). These techniques included participant observation, systematic observation, artifact and document analyses, stimulated recall using videotaped classes, questionnaires, and both formal and informal interviews. Periodic tours of the town and visits to local shops and public institutions were made. During these tours I stopped in restaurants, read public postings, and talked informally with residents.

Data collection began two days before the start of school and officially ended just prior to the Christmas break. During the first month of the study, I was present in the school on a daily basis. In subsequent months, I made field trips twice per week on average. The length of time for each site visitation ranged from one hour to the entire school day (i.e. 7:30 am to 3:30 pm).

Observer Bias

I observed that my continued interrogation of Steve regarding the acquisition, evaluation, and utilization of his occupational knowledge led him to form his own questions regarding what he knew and how he used that knowledge. The other physical educator validated my perceptions during an interview when she told that "Steve seems happier, better prepared and more into teaching than he's been in the past. He's a good teacher, but he seems to be enjoying himself more."

Data Analyses

Data analyses began the first day of data collection and continued for two years after the last visitation day. These analyses allowed the me to begin developing data summary themes, check emerging themes against recurring field behavior, and tailor the data collection techniques to gain greater access to data amenable to testing and understanding the emerging themes. Specific strategies employed to insure data trustworthiness were triangulation of methods, member checks (particularly the use of key informants and the constant use of follow-up interviews to check consistency of responses), and disconfirming case analyses (the investigation of responses and/or occurrences which were incompatible with emerging themes). In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of this study, data analyses were completed with particular attention given to the

social and cultural roots of the utilized knowledge.

Findings

Knowledge Acquisition

A primary purpose of this study was to identify the sources of knowledge that Steve used to influence and determine his pedagogical practices. Data analyses indicated that Steve appropriated knowledge from five primary sources: a.) community , b.) school, c.) profession, d.) personal biography, and e.) occupational experience.

Community

Steve showed no great concern for soliciting information from outside the confines of the school. His attitude appeared to be that such information represented an intrusion and interfered with his professional practices and policies. He was not, however, immune from community demands and interests. To the contrary, the community was a powerfully influential factor informing Steve's pedagogical practices. Occupationally relevant knowledge stemming from the community would come to Steve in several ways. Formal arrangements between Steve and the wider social community of Emerald Valley included the elected school board, a lay curriculum committee, open houses, and the teacher home-visit counseling program. Informal arrangements included direct and indirect contacts with parents and other community members.

The knowledge acquired from these sources most often came to bear on the facilities and equipment placed at Steve's disposal as well his student discipline policies. To the degree that they were impacted by facility and equipment acquisitions, Steve's content decisions and selections were also informed by the community.

Parents were most often concerned with the treatment of their children in Steve's class. Parents held a strong influence over Steve's discipline and management practices. In Emerald Valley, Steve believes the parents want teachers to "relate to the kids by rationalizing and explaining the why of discipline. You have to appeal to (the students') intelligence." In answer to the question 'How do you learn which consequences are appropriate for the students?' Steve replied "feedback you receive from the parents through the years."

School

Steve derived occupationally relevant knowledge from several school sources; administrators, other teachers, students, and the maintenance staff. Knowledge from school sources could be divided further into the formal culture and the informal culture. The definitional divide between formal and informal culture in this study was between occupational requirements and occupational decisions.

The formal culture was a source of knowledge which informed Steve of his job requirements and limitations. Thus the formal culture framed Steve's everyday work world. Knowledge gleaned from the formal culture included administrative dictates, committee decisions, state requirements, and school district policies. The most significant players in the formal school culutre were the administrators (i.e. principal, assistant principal, and activity coordinator).

The informal culture was a source of knowledge used by Steve to help him make his

occupational decisions. Knowledge from the informal school culture was the result of meetings and casual conversations with students and school staff members. The informal culture was comprised of other teachers, staff members, and selected students (e.g. Steve's teaching assistants).

The isolation experienced by most teachers (Lortie, 1975), did not seem to plague Steve. In fact, he faced constant interruptions from teachers, students, and administrators. It is a rare class in the gymnasium where there is not some interruption of Steve's teaching to either solicit or report information. The information exchange seldom, if ever, dealt with the pedagogical concerns of the class. Administrators would stop by to inspect equipment, inform Steve of a meeting or a change in policy. Students would bring medical notes, office memos, or daily announcements. Other teachers would come in to obtain information on a students' behavior, inquire about a coaching clinic or discuss the school football betting pool. In some cases, individuals would report to Steve that he was to lose his teaching station for the next period or even for the entire day. The implicit message appeared to be that physical education was a relatively unimportant subject matter. These continuous disruptions may be indicative of a lack of respect for Steve's physical education classes or that Steve was not essential to the activity of the gym. Steve appeared to accept interruptions as a regular part of his occupational environment.

Noticeably absent from any discourse in the school culture were the important topics of educational, moral, or political commitments (Zeichner, 1983) necessary to guide the pedagogical practices of the teachers of E.V.H.S.. There was what Giroux (1988a) called "an ominous silence regarding the role that. . . public schooling should play in advancing democratic practices, critical citizenship, and the role of the teacher as intellectual" (p. 175). The topics of discussion in the school culture functioned around the immediate concerns of school practice and the long term agenda for the school's life. The impact of the school and its practices on its students and community was a non-topic.

Professional

In an effort to more clearly trace knowledge sources, I categorized professional resources as located or originating outside the school and emanating from professional societies and organizations. These sources included professional coursework, workshops, conferences, and published materials.

The opportunities for Steve to acquire professional knowledge are limited. The purchase of professional books and journals, undertaking additional coursework and joining professional associations are Steve's personal and financial responsibility. Consequently, he invested only in those activities which held his personal interest. The school district does, however, reimburse its teachers for attending an occasional staff development activity. But as Lortie (1975) noted, the opportunities for continued professional learning represents but a small segment in the work life of a teacher. It appears that Lawson (1985) was accurate in asserting that "scarce opportunities and resources for continued learning inevitably affect knowledge use in the workplace" (p. 14).

Occupational Experience

Although Steve is not isolated from other members of the school staff, he is isolated from

direct contact with new sources of the subject matter content used in his everyday teaching. Nowhere in his daily repertoire of duties is time specifically set aside by the school for Steve to function as an intellectual--an individual who acquires and critiques specific knowledge (Giroux, 1988b). His limited "free time" in school was consumed by other, more immediate, duties (e.g., running off tests, phone calls, follow-ups on a disciplinary actions). Sandwiching a phone call between classes to buy popcorn for the boys basketball game, Steve once commented "I love wearing all these hats." Steve's occupational experience has the embedded message that the life of the school is larger and of greater signifigance than the life of Steve's class or pedagogical activity.

Personal Biography

Steve feels that much of the knowledge he has appropriated for his classes was born of personal initiative and experience. That is, he has had to go beyond his normal duties as a teacher to keep updated on new information. He does not, however, consider himself to be extremely knowledgeable. He therefore seeks new knowledge when the opportunity is present and does not conflict with another professional duty or impose too greatly on his personal time. Personal biography did not, however, appear to be as influential in Steve's day-to-day practices as were the interests of the community, school, or profession.

Knowledge Evaluation

Steve's evaluation of occupational knowledge was the mediated intersection between the use of the knowledge and its source. From 16 years of experience , Steve had constructed a comfortable system of day-to-day operation. When presented with new information, he seemed to screen the knowledge in terms of its ability to solve a perceived problem or improve a current practice. The problems and practices around which knowledge was most often evaluated include: a.) class organization and managment, b.) content knowledge, c.) teaching behavior, and d.) state and federal dictates.

Class Operation and Organization

Steve used few sources in appropriating knowledge used to organize and operate his classes. His primary source was the p.e. curriculum guide which clearly specified the rules and procedures relative to the dominant routines of the daily physical education class. The guide was authored by Steve. The criterion for evaluating knowledge to solve the problems of order in the classroom was Steve's satisfaction with the results of the policy, rule, or procedure. If it "worked" all was well for the problem had been solved. The level of evaluation needed to go no further than that.

Content Knowledge.

Unlike classroom order, Steve was constantly on the alert for new knowledge regarding activities for his classes and appeared ready to gather such information from any available source. In particular he sought new drills, information on rules or game history, and details regarding specific game skills. In determining what content knowledge would be used when, Steve used the multitude of variables defining his teaching environment as primary criteria. Weather, time of year, equipment and facility availability all weighted heavily in judging when and how content knowledge would be distributed in his classes. Griffey, Hacker, and Housner (1988) similarly found the use

of context factors as an influential force in the decision-making scheme of experienced teachers. It therefore appeared that the selection of content was informed by pedagogical practice and its distribution was influenced by the teaching enviornment.

Teaching behavior

Steve showed little regard for knowledge directly impacting his instructional behavior. The structure of the school provided Steve no feedback on his instructional practices, nor was there visible encouragement for him to stimulate greater student achievement. The multiple and immediate demands placed on Steve's time and resources often relegated the learning of each of his approximately 130 students to the back-burner of his priorities. Further, there seems to be precious little incentive for Steve to improve his teaching or stimulate increases in student learning. It became apparent that the growing body of knowledge and research on teaching in physical education does not even gain Steve's attention, much less inform and influence his practices.

State and Federal Dictates

State and federal dictates also serve as evaluative criteria in formulating Steve's pedagogical practice. Steve did not look to these agencies for information, but rather he endeavored to structure his practices to be in compliance with such demands. In instances where Steve believed that school and state imperatives ran counter to his own personal beliefs and his interpretation of the community moral standards, resistance was noted.

Regarding the new state guidelines for physical education, Steve expressed frustration that change seems to negate previous work. He felt frustrated that the amount of work that had gone into developing his curriculum is ignored by those in state agencies. "Emerald Valley has always prided themselves on being a leader. Now we'll have to throw them (present guidelines) out for no apparent reason or justification."

Knowledge Utilization

Steve's occupational knowledge was traced from its source, through an evalution screen, and into its use as pedagogical practice. It was not my intention to link every teaching behavior to its specific source(s), thereby accounting for the totality of Steve's behavior. Rather, I attempted to understand the way Steve used the occupational knowledge he had acquired and evaluated. I divided Steve's use of knowledge into three major categories. They were: a.) teacher as conveyor, b.) teacher as synthesizer, and c.) teacher as interpreter. Time, circumstance and purpose would dictate the mode of knowledge utilization.

Conveyor

When Steve assumed the role of conveyor, his use of knowledge was restricted to simply reporting the received knowledge. He would merely transmit the information for one source to another with little or no interpretation or embellishment. Knowledge used in this way appeared to have no meaning for Steve, he demonstrated no ownership in it, and seldom demonstrated any interest in the information. When in the role of conveyor, Steve appeared to be merely fulfilling an obligation or occupational responsibility.

Synthesizer

Given the quantity of information Steve receives from numerous sources, he must often synthesize the information to make it useful in undertaking the task at hand. Classroom rules, operating procedures, subject matter and grading criteria were all areas in which Steve appeared to synthesize knowledge from personal biography, professional, community, and school sources. These practices had become refined and further synthesized through years of occupational experience.

Interpreter

Steve's occupational responsibilities often required him to interpret the demands and standards of the community, school, and profession. In this role, Steve would interact with students in ways he believed appropriate based on his perceptions of both the student and his role as teacher. When acting in the role as interpreter, Steve would consciously fulfill the structural-functionalist role of preservation, conservation, and perpetuation of the wider social order. Steve's interpretations of the cultures of school, community, and profession thus informed his pedagogical practices.

Occupational Knowledge in Action

The perceived task demands of the teaching environment played a dominant role in Steve's selection of knowledge and the method by which that knowledge was used. Teaching tasks dealing with interpersonal relationships appeared most strongly influenced by cultural imperatives (i.e. school and community) with a strong, albeit secondary, influence from personal beliefs. Knowledge necessary for content selection, organization, and presentation was derived from professional sources and occupational experience with a limited influence from both personal beliefs and community perceptions.

The results of this study led to the conclusion that the teacher's personal biography and perceptions of the messages embedded in school and community cultures played primary roles in shaping and defining the teacher's pedagogical practice in physical education. Steve came to see his teaching role as helping students understand their limits to and potential for contributing to the existing local community. Although it appeared that Steve did not perceive the subject matter of his classes as providing knowledge necessary for maximizing his students' potential societal contribution, he did believe that what he taught was useful information for enhancing the quality of the students' personal lives.

Discussion

The importance of this study resides in the area of teacher change and development. Recognition of the cultural codes embedded in the intellectual activity of a teacher identifies the social mission performed by schools. The status afforded subject matter, control of student behavior, and work environment of the teacher can be seen as a dialectic processes between the teacher's voice and the culture in which he/she reside. Recognizing which knowledge is appropriated and transformed through pedagogical practice deepens the understanding of not only what is going on in classrooms, but why. Fixing a teachers actions within the cultural spheres of school and society brings to light the shared meanings underlying the behavioral occurrences

comprising teaching and learning in public schools.

Footnotes

[1] All names used in this report are fictitious. The names of the teachers, students, schools, and communities described in this account have been changed to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality.

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